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# BIOGRAPHY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY—II

BY WILLIAM ROSCOE THAYER

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THE wonderful Greeks who visualized in permanent and vital symbols even their deepest thoughts, pictured time, Chronos, as devouring his children. His appetite is as insatiable now as ever. Just as we have come to regard one fashion as enduring, he creates another to take its place. Thomas Carlyle thundered his depreciatory doctrines on eighteenth century France until he had made the world listen to him and believe; and then, while his echoes still went reverberating, John Morley came and taught us in tones far less vehement, to see the good in the France which Carlyle had weighed and found wanting. Morley's account of Voltaire if you seek to know what Voltaire actually was in time, will give you the necessary information. But for Carlyle, time was always merely a film, stretching in front of eternity, neither wholly transparent, nor wholly opaque. So Carlyle's judgments are not those of a decade or a fashion, but those which conform to the eternal laws, as he saw them. And Voltaire, or Rousseau, or Mirabeau, has a very different appearance to the intellect busied primarily with things temporal from what they have when they are thrown on the screen of things spiritual and eternal.

During nearly forty years, I have passed through several phases in my estimate of Thomas Carlyle. In my youth he made me a hero-worshipper and a hater of shams; he held me spell-bound by his humor and by the magnificence of many of his pages; he disclosed to me reality more real, than I had found in any other writer; he spoke to me with an austerity strangely fascinating, and in language as rhythmic as the long, everlasting roll of the sea, messages that might have come from a Hebrew prophet.

Then followed a period, not entirely of disillusion, but

of criticism and of slackened admiration. I perceived his mannerisms both in diction and in method. If nature has mannerisms she disguises them. Although she brings us a hundred storms in a year, each seems original and not an imitation of any which went before. I fell to doubting Carlyle's eternal verities; and I asked myself whether a man who did not discern a living hero in two of his contemporaries, like Lincoln and Cavour, could be trusted to discover dead heroes in times long past, and to measure them truly. Having lived through, if not outgrown, the age of wonder, I hungered for hard, concrete facts; for ideals which could be demonstrated; for the logic and continuity which science afforded us.

Then I entered a third phase in which I saw again Carlyle as an amazing genius, Carlyle, who flashed into the very heart and soul of men and women, Carlyle, who had a special gift for seeing through many parts of the film of time which were opaque to most of us, Carlyle, who beyond all other historians understood the terror of life and its inexorable doom, in which each of us has a stake. I delighted afresh in his incomparable humor. Who can compare with him in seizing upon the small, homely, cosy things? How he pounces on an apparent trifle, which, properly estimated, was the pivot on which history turned—such, for instance, as old Dragoon Drouet who, having caught a glimpse of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette taking flight in their berline towards the French border, strides over the fields by a short cut to Varennes, intercepts them there, causes their arrest, and so turns awry the catastrophe of the French Revolution. I doubt whether any other biographer or historian has ever equalled Carlyle in his genius for discerning the smallest detail in externals and in sweeping, as on a seraph's wing, over vast generalizations on the inmost meaning of life.

As a biographer, Carlyle is very uneven. Having decided that Frederick the Great was a hero, before he undertook to write about him, he could never look straight at the man except when he had magnifying or distorting glasses on. The result is that Carlyle, the most insistent of all historians on the moral interpretation of history, makes of Frederick the Great, who was really a monarch without moral sense in public affairs and the corruptor of the German people, a hero and model. No wonder that Carlyle,

blinded by this false simulation of greatness, should not recognize true greatness in George Washington but should sneer at him. Granted, however, that Frederick's portrait was to be painted as Carlyle saw him, what other historian could equal the variety, the humor, with which Carlyle painted it? For lifelikeness it could not be excelled, and yet it lacks symmetry, compactness, and the supreme quality of finality and beauty. If Carlyle only had had more of the Greek in his make-up! If he had only taken the Greek motto *Μηδὲν ἄγαν*—nothing too much—which every artist should carry stamped on his heart! But he was a Goth, and Gothic genius riots in digressions and superfluities. He reminds me of Rembrandt among the painters who gets so many of his effects from shadows and darkness. The figures in Carlyle's historic dramas seem like Rembrandt's portraits to emerge out of blackest night into life and color before they sink back into blackest night again.

We are no other than a moving row  
Of magic shadow-shapes that come and go  
Round with this sun-illumin'd lantern held  
In midnight by the master of the show.

Carlyle's *Oliver Cromwell* is another masterpiece of interpretation. In it he exalts another great man who, it happened, was worthy of exaltation. Perhaps it is fanciful to suggest that to understand this book we must remember that it was written ten years after *The French Revolution*—the most astonishing prose epic in the language. In his study of the upheaval in France, Carlyle saw that anarchy and ruin must result from such an upheaval, unless there were a truly strong and wise man to lead it. Oliver Cromwell, who dominated the English revolution and was swayed by the deepest religious principles (fanaticism, his enemies would say), *was* a strong man and worthy of being revered. If, on the other hand, you turn to the *Life of Schiller* written earlier, before his passion for interpretation hurried Carlyle before it, you will discover rather a conventional specimen of biography in the first third of the nineteenth century. His *Life of John Sterling*, however, is one of the sweetest revelations of a fine manly character which one friend ever made of another; although viewed from the ideals of art, it has its excrescences and excesses.

The Italians have a proverb which sums up the common opinion of authors towards translators: "*Traduttore, tradi-*

*tore.*" The play on the Italian words cannot be reproduced in English, but the meaning can be: "Translator, Traitor or Betrayer." I feel that in too many cases this motto would apply also to biographers and to no one more conspicuously than to James Anthony Froude. I once asked Charles Eliot Norton who knew both men, how Carlyle came to designate Froude as his biographer, and Mr. Norton replied by quoting Landor's sadly cynical epigram:

The wisest of the wise  
Listen to pretty lies,  
And love to hear them told.  
Doubt not that Solomon  
Listen'd to many a one,  
Some in his youth and more when he grew old.

Froude, who was younger than Carlyle by more than twenty years, had been one of his earliest and staunchest devotees and, as Carlyle sank into old age, Froude attended him assiduously, and, it is not unkind to infer, suggested that he be made the great man's literary executor and biographer. We can see how, under the circumstances, Carlyle should be gratified to know that a disciple who gave him back his own opinions, should have charge of this important service. But see how tragic the results were!

Thomas Carlyle, in many respects, filled for the English speaking world during fifty years of the nineteenth century, a place similar to that filled in the eighteenth century by Samuel Johnson. Through the good fortune of having James Boswell for his biographer, Johnson lives as the most interesting, if not as the most beloved, figure of his age; whereas Carlyle, after the publication of his life by Froude suffered a personal eclipse from which he has not yet emerged. This is not owing to the fact that the fashion in writing history has changed, that science has discredited romanticism, that liberal and even radical ideas have swamped Carlyle's conservatism—Johnson's Toryism also had gone out of fashion before he died, but that did not lessen the interest men took in his personality: Carlyle's wounded name with posterity was due to Froude's betrayal.

I do not imply that Froude intentionally traduced Carlyle, his natural purpose being, of course, to magnify his hero; but as a biographer he was both false and inartistic. He was false, because he used the material which he found in Carlyle's letters and diaries to scourge persons whom he himself hated; he was inartistic, because by putting the

wrong emphasis on Carlyle's conduct he gave the world a wrong impression of the *total* man. To pick out a temporary state of mind, a fleeting irritation, a unique rudeness, a whim or foible, harmless and even amusing if described properly, and to present these as if they were habitual, the very bone and sinew of the man's character, was bad art. That kindest of critics and sweetest-natured of friends, Horace Furness, told me that he never wanted to hear of Carlyle again after he read in Froude's life, that he had allowed his wife to scrub the bricks in the little backyard of Number 5, Cheyne Row.

This is merely one example out of hundreds in Froude's biography, which illustrate the harm biographers may do by improper emphasis, unless each event is so framed that the reader can judge it truly, as he would do if he could have seen it himself. He either sins wilfully or is incompetent. In Froude's case we are forced to conclude that he sinned deliberately in order to gratify his own spite, or to push his own opinions. How otherwise shall we explain the multitude of verbal changes from Carlyle's manuscript to Froude's printed version—changes in some of which the neutral or kindly epithets of the original became abusive or malignant? How otherwise shall we explain that the slip of paper, on which Carlyle prohibited the publication of one of the volumes of reminiscences, disappeared, and that Froude discovered it only after the volume was printed, and Carlyle's niece insistently demanded it? I cite Froude as the great warning to biographers. He not only committed a crime against the hero he wished to glorify, but I fear that he so damaged Carlyle's reputation that it can be restored only when some true man, equipped with honesty, artistic sense, and adequate biographical talent shall write a life of him.

How different the fortune of Macaulay, Carlyle's chief contemporary master in the writing of history! His life by his nephew, Sir George Otto Trevelyan, seems to me, second only to Boswell's Johnson. Trevelyan wrote on a different plan from Boswell's, but he achieved what he intended not less remarkably than did Boswell. In this work you have a perfect interweaving of biography and history, balance, discretion, a rare skill in summarizing, ample quotation from letters and journals, but not too ample, and a sufficiently intimate portrayal of Macaulay as public man,

and especially as son, brother, uncle, and friend. The doctrinaires, who supposed thirty years ago that they had killed Macaulay, are themselves dead, but he lives on, and it seems quite unlikely that the English-speaking race will soon if ever throw over into oblivion this spokesman of some of its mightiest characteristics. As long as Macaulay is read, Trevelyan's life of him also will be read, and it will serve as a pattern for countless future biographers.

Remember that one-half, I might almost say four-fifths, of a biography depends on the biographer. The charm of *The Life of Alice Freeman Palmer* springs from the fact that her husband, Professor George H. Palmer wrote it. He saw her as a beautiful ideal, and had the art and imagination, and glow to make us all see her as he did. On the other hand, Justin Winsor, in his biography of Columbus falls short, because he devotes too much time to the low qualities and misdemeanors of Columbus. Now Columbus was created to discover America, and not to be a pattern, like St. Francis of Assisi, or some of the Pilgrim Fathers, of the highest Christian virtues. In like fashion, it seems to me, the Reverend A. V. G. Allen's portrait of Phillips Brooks is out of drawing, because he emphasizes too much, matters which interested Allen as a theologian, more than they did Brooks as an Evangelist, whose mission it was to speak at all times and at all places with wonderful persuasion, the message of God.

I shall not attempt to discuss, even briefly, the later biographies in English. I have already mentioned Morley's *Life of Gladstone* and Winston Churchill's life of his father, Lord Randolph. The latter would be twice as good if it were half as long, for Churchill errs, as most Englishmen do, in attaching an exaggerated importance to partisan political details. After all, Sir Stafford Northcote, Goschen, Lord Hartington, and even Lord Salisbury are not personages of heroic size or gigantic importance, when viewed through the perspective of thirty years, and Mr. Churchill describes them so minutely that I find it difficult to trace in his description the trunk-line of their policy.

Hallam Tennyson's life of his father would confirm those who hold that the widow or son of a celebrity ought never to be his biographer. On the other hand Francis Darwin and Leonard Huxley both produced satisfactory biographies of their fathers.

I have not considered French, Italian, and German biographical works, partly because I am not familiar with enough of them to draw any general conclusions. A whole library has been written about Napoleon but, as far as I know nobody has yet achieved a transcendent biography of him. The same is true of Bismarck, and the likelihood seems slight that he will ever be put into a book to be read throughout the world. For German biographers are so absorbed in the shoe-buckles and laundry bills of their heroes—witness Düntzer's *Goethe* and *Schiller*—that they are unable to get inside of the man, or even to stand upright and look at him eye to eye. They have too much the posture of lackeys and valets.

In French, Paul Sabatier's *Life of St. Francis* illustrates how, through sympathy, the right biographer can almost persuade his readers that a character who comes to them through a golden mist of miracles is real. More recently, Valéry-Radot has depicted the great man of science, Louis Pasteur, so nobly that he seems as worthy of wearing a halo as did any medieval saint.

In one branch of biography the French have excelled, and that is in critical and analytical lives of public men. Whoever reads the monographs on *Cavour* and on *Metternich*, by Charles de Mazade, will see excellent specimens of this *genre*, which has thriven too little among us because our historical students were long intimidated by the German professors, who sneered at any work in which footnotes and references did not outmeasure the text. But this despotism by pedants is, we may hope, at an end.

Bringing our survey of the art of biography down to the present, multiplicity seems to be its foremost trait. We understand that any man who is *interesting* may be a proper subject for a biographer; kings, dukes and the upper classes must now have more than their title and position in order to attract us. We recognize, also, that each person, like the sitter for a painter, requires to be drawn in the attitude and atmosphere which will most fitly reveal him. I regard sympathy as an indispensable qualification in the biographer, although a good many persons still believe that devil's advocates are more likely to tell the truth. The sympathy which I mean, however, does not degenerate into unrestrained eulogy but interprets the defects, blunders, and even the sins of its sub-



ject, in their true relations. The aim of the biographer should be *totality* which, if achieved, coincides with Michael Angelo's definition of beauty: "*Il più nell'uno*"—the whole in one, or the universal in the particular.

To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower;  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour.

So I leave biography on the threshold of what may be a golden age. Its outlook was never brighter. Its votaries will practise it with a constantly increasing skill. The demand for veracity will not slacken. The public, grown more discerning, will read it with greater relish. And I think that we may predict that the general average of biographical writing will be higher than it has been, though the number of master biographers like that of master portrait painters can never be large, hardly more than two or three in a century.

The fact that the persons and events the biographer depicts were *real* will lend to them an additional attractiveness.

Given life, the first impulse of life, the incessant triumphant impulse, is to manifest itself in individuals. From the beginning there has never been a moment, or the fraction of a second, when the universe or the tiniest part of it, became abstract. In the world of matter not less than in the organic world of animals and plants, always and everywhere and forever—individuals! From atom to Sirius, nothing but individuals! Even in the protean transmutation of one thing into another, of life into death, and death into life, individuality keeps pace with each changing stage.

Since the process of individualization is from lower to higher, from simple to complex, the acknowledged great men in history, or the persons who stand out from any mass, are endowed with unusual qualities, or with common qualities in an uncommon degree—an endowment which gives them more points of contact, more power, more interest, more charm. These are the men and women whom biography perpetuates. The master creations of fiction spring from the human brain; the subjects of biography are the very creations of God himself; the realities of God must forever transcend the fictions of man.

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